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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: AUGUST 2012

SCANDAL! SCANDAL!

Can I touch your feet?

Trouble in paradise? It seems as though something is amiss at *The Oxford American*.

> Smirnoff confronts ‘secrecy’ surrounding firings at Oxford American
>
> *Fights between interns, a senior editor and the editor of The Oxford American magazine erupted just weeks before editor Marc Smirnoff and managing editor and art editor Carol Ann Fitzgerald were fired Sunday.*

Apparently, Smirnoff has no idea why he and Fitzgerald were investigated and suddenly fired.

> *“We’ve just worked our butts off in good faith,” Smirnoff said.*

No doubt, but doing what? Oh wait…..

> *At the same time, Smirnoff has admitted to giving underage interns alcohol, which is a crime, said Board Director Rick Massey. And, in a letter sent recently to UCA President Tom Courtway, Smirnoff admitted he had touched or photographed feet.*

Yeah, Marc, there was that. And did this foot-touching happen only once? Think hard!

> *Smirnoff put the blame for what has happened to him and Fitzgerald squarely on three people employed at the magazine, but Massey said many, many more people — including former interns — were interviewed during the investigation earlier this month. They all corroborate that Smirnoff had behaved inappropriately, Massey said.*

And how does Carol fit into all of this? Well, let’s say it’s something “sexual in nature”. She says that she was sexually harassed, but didn’t want to pipe up about it until after she was fired.

> What does Marc have to say in his defense?
>
> *This is a case that pitted Smirnoff and Fitzgerald against “fancy, rich, powerful, sharply dressed people.”*

Well, that may be true. In the meantime, the man destined to be Bill Clinton II is taking over as editor. Meet Warwick Sabin, who will join the House of Representatives this coming January.

> *“I’m not thinking about my future,” Smirnoff said. “I know there are some corrupt people who have snuck their way to the bosom of the magazine, and I have to fight them. This isn’t about lawyers to me — this is about the heart and the soul of the Oxford American and, sadly in some ways, [the magazine] I still love.”*

The humanity! It seems that Marc will have to put his carpet bag back into his BMW and keep driving. Interns of Tennessee and Mississippi, you have been warned!

LEAVE A COMMENT

BRAVE

You don't think much of men in kilts, do you John?

There is a drive-in theater in my hometown- one of the last drive-ins in the country. It's awesome: digital projection, beautifully manicured lot (the proprietor has a masters in Landscape Architecture from Harvard); AND a double feature. My husband and I went to see Pixar's *Brave* there when it opened.

I wasn't going to blog about *Brave* because it was so terrible. I was just going to pretend it didn't happen. We left before it finished. It would have been $20 wasted; but I think that there is a moral here.

Not only was the plot predictable (warmed-over 1970s feminism) but the lead, Merida, was not a sympathetic character. Self-absorbed, irresponsible… I think that Once Upon A Blog says it best:

> *… I don't have a problem with Merida being a princess. Nor do I have a problem that she has to deal with the marriage issue. For the era, that was primarily what princesses were useful for: forming alliances by joining in marriage and producing heirs. How she deals with that is where she has to show her individuality. What is a problem, though, is the lack of both growth and of personal purpose by Merida, beyond the crisis (of her own making).*

Merida felt no remorse that she turned her mother into a bear. Merida is a brat at the beginning, and it sounds like she stayed a brat to the very end.

As if Merida wasn't bad enough, there wasn't a single respectable male in the highlands. Not one. They were all either whipped by Merida's mother, idiots or children. I don't know how you can have a movie about empowerment when there are so few intellectual peers for the heroine. I felt embarrassed for asking my husband to watch this movie.

A bra-burning coed teleported into the Middle Ages isn't going to keep me in my seat. Story matters, Lasseter.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The morning is wiser than the evening.

The best stories explain complicated things simply. Imagine trying to explain *how to behave* to a child within the time of their attention span.

There is one story that gets close to doing this; I've found three different versions of it: *The Talking Eggs* (Cajun); *Mother Holle* (Hesse, Germany); *Vasilisa the Beautiful* (Russia).

The set up is the same in each tale. There is a good daughter and at least one bad one. The good daughter is kind, obedient, hard-working and respectful of others. She is neglected and disliked by her mother. The bad daughter is arrogant, abusive, lazy and selfish; she is carefully brought up to be this way.

The good daughter gets sent on a quest and falls into the clutches of the witch. The witch tests her: Is the girl industrious? Is the girl honest? Is she kind to others? Is she kind to animals? Is the girl wise? Does she take advice gracefully? Is she humble?

When the good daughter proves herself, the world opens up for her. She becomes rich, marries well and above all finds happiness. Naturally, the bad daughter wants the same blessings; seeks out the witch and fails her trials. As much bad is heaped on the rotten girl as good was heaped on the kind-hearted one.

Does Baba Yaga/Mother Holle/Conjure Woman care a jot that the bad daughter was made bad by her mother? No, not a bit. The witch is as heartless as any stranger or animal would be. The bad girl is an irritant; so she is washed out of the witch's life just like an eye cries out sand.

That is a hard lesson for children to learn. You're not judged by how others have treated you, but by how you treat others. You're not the center of the universe. The world isn't loving. Act well, otherwise, don't expect a second chance.

It's a hard lesson but completely necessary. Imagine a child who never learned it: a prisoner of their past and continually disappointed by other people. *Always chased by venomous snakes* . Really, it's a blessing that stories like *Mother Holle* exist. If life is a swimming pool, they are the shallow end.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE RIGHT HOOK

Out in the World.

My fiction-writing mentor is a very interesting character. I'll put in a plug for his book when it's published, and you can read some of his work here. He does great book reviews here.

The arrangement is (or was, until I figure out imagery) I send him stories and he sends me a letter with pointers. For the most part, I need to unlearn everything I learned trying to be a journalist in the long-long-ago. Except for one thing.

The hook. Every newsprint article should have a hook in the nut graph. That means that there should be something in the first paragraph that grabs the readers' attention and makes them want to read more. There must be something to make them *care*.

I found that relatively easy to do for investigative reporting. It's a lot harder for fiction. IMHO, good fiction is harder to write than good journalism. How do you make somebody care in the first couple of paragraphs?

I've surveyed a number of novels and short stories (not the same creature, but they do have some similarities) and I have found two ways predominate:

1) A character who I care about. (That's not the same as 'like'. Sometimes I read on because I want them to get a comeuppance.)

2) A mystery that I want resolved *in my way*. I read on because I want confirmation of my insights. (A little deeper down, that's confirmation of my biases.) I'll keep reading if I turn out to be right; I'll definitely keep reading if I turn out to be right, but the author executes in a thoughtful way that I didn't expect. To my mind, that's the only type of "twist" a reader really wants.

If I'm wrong, however, and the writer doesn't *quickly* give me a thoughtful reason for resolving the mystery in a non-a.nolen way, I'm outta there.

Harsh, but I don't think that I'm unique. In Curtis's story *Out in the World* (linked to above), I instinctively don't like the young women who the cameraman focuses in on. No cameraman has ever zoomed in on me and I don't like baseball. She probably doesn't even like baseball. She's probably just there because she wants to impress some guy. Or her parents choose baseball as their 'circus'. Do they even vote? I'd *really* like her to get a comeuppance.

Oh, god- and she's texting. I hate texting- it's superficial communication. I know Curt's going somewhere that I'll like. Ha, ha!

BFF- yes, that's an abbreviation that she'd use. I also dislike women's mag lingo. She's a man-eater; keep it coming, Curt!

Oh, wait. He loves her. She's just out of reach. That's kinda why I don't like her. She's out of reach.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE HOLLYWOOD SHORTLIST

There's a clever lit mag called *Strange Horizons*. The editors recently published a list of stories that are submitted too often. They're not talking about re-submissions; they're talking about would-be authors' done-before plot lines.

I'll list a few of my favorite dud-plots, each in a different color to prime your creative juices and counter their stultifying effects. Catch the whole thing here, it's hilarious.

Creative person is having trouble creating.

1. Writer has writer's block.
2. Painter can't seem to paint anything good.
3. Sculptor can't seem to sculpt anything good.
4. Creative person's work is reviled by critics who don't understand how brilliant it is.
5. Creative person meets a muse (either one of the nine classical Muses or a more individual muse) and interacts with them, usually by keeping them captive.

A place is described, with no plot or characters.

Technology and/or modern life turn out to be soulless.

1. Office life turns out to be soul-deadening, literally or metaphorically.
2. All technology is shown to be soulless; in contrast, anything "natural" is by definition good. For example, living in a weather-controlled environment is bad, because it's artificial, while dying of pneumonia is good, because it's natural.
3. The future is utopian and is considered by some or many to be perfect, but perfection turns out to be boring and stagnant and soul-deadening; it turns out that only through imperfection, pain, misery, and nature can life actually be good.
4. In the future, all learning is soulless and electronic, until kid is exposed to ancient wisdom in the form of a book.
5. In the future, everything is soulless and electronic, until protagonist (usually a kid) is exposed to ancient wisdom in the form of a wise old person who's lived a non-electronic life.

White protagonist is given wise and mystical advice by Holy Simple Native Folk.

In a comedic/satirical story, vampires and/or other supernatural creatures come out publicly and demand (and/or get) the vote and other rights, but people are prejudiced against them. [Oh, wait- that's a synopsis of HBO's *True Blood*.]

A "surprise" twist ending occurs. [Note that we do like endings that we didn't expect, as long as they derive naturally from character action. But note, too, that we've seen a lot of twist endings, and we find most of them to be pretty predictable, even the ones not on this list.]

1. The characters' actions are described in a way meant to fool the reader into thinking they're humans, but in the end it turns out they're not humans, as would have been obvious to anyone looking at them.
2. Creatures are described as "vermin" or "pests" or "monsters," but in the end it turns out they're humans.
3. The author conceals some essential piece of information from the reader that would be obvious if the reader were present at the scene, and then suddenly reveals that information at the end of the story. [This can be done well, but rarely is.]
4. Person is floating in a formless void; in the end, they're born.
5. Person uses time travel to achieve some particular result, but in the end something unexpected happens that thwarts their plan.
6. The main point of the story is for the author to metaphorically tell the reader, "Ha, ha, I tricked you! You thought one thing was going on, but it was really something else! You sure are dumb!"
7. A mysteriously-named Event is about to happen ("Today was the day Jimmy would have to report for The Procedure"), but the nature of the Event isn't revealed until the end of the story, when it turns out to involve death or other unpleasantness. [Several classic sf stories use this approach, which is one reason we're tired of seeing it. Another reason is that we can usually guess the twist well ahead of time, which makes the mysteriousness annoying.]
8. In the future, an official government permit is required in order to do some particular ordinary thing, but the specific thing a permit is required for isn't (usually) revealed until the end of the story.
9. Characters speculate (usually jokingly): "What if X were true of the universe?" (For example: "What if the universe is a simulation?") At the end, something happens that implies that X is true.
10. Characters in the story (usually in the far future and/or on an alien planet) use phrases that are phonetic respellings or variations of modern English words or phrases, such as "Hyoo Manz" or "Pleja Legions," which the reader isn't intended to notice; in the end, a surprise twist reveals that there's a connection to 20th/21st-century English speakers.

LEAVE A COMMENT

SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT

Shooting an Elephant (1936) is one of Orwell's famous essays and it is rightfully held up as excellent writing. I'm not going to argue against that here. I will say that the essay shows why Orwell was a first-class writer and a second-class intellect.

My college textbooks quoted from *Shooting an Elephant*, usually in reference to the horrors of colonialism. Particularly this quote:

> *All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.*

I believe that the quoting-authors' intention was to illustrate the dehumanizing effect of colonialism on the subjects as well as the colonizers. It's the same argument that is used against torture.

Having read the essay, I'm dissatisfied with that interpretation. Consider the sentence immediately preceding the previous quote.

> *I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it.*

By 'a great deal better' he means 'more British'. Orwell suffered from a bipolar attitude towards the people he ruled, let me give you an example. I have read that he tattooed himself in solidarity with the Burmese peasants; yet would be offended if a working class guest didn't change clothes for dinner. Like so many naive and self-righteous aristo-socialists, he only half understood the people who he worked so earnestly to liberate.

The 'younger empires' he's talking about are the local governments that took over after the British. These governments can be very, very vicious. My point is that the viciousness didn't go away because colonialism did.

My college professors would all cry foul here, and claim that it's the aftermath of colonialism that is the cause of 'bad' government. I would believe them if the pre-British rulers weren't also vicious towards their people.

I don't think that the Konbaung Dynasty was evil, I don't think that the British Empire was evil, and neither is the quasi-military government that Myanmar has now. I think that to rule Myanmar, you have to act like the ruler of the Burmese. Sometimes that will offend the sensibilities of Westerners.

There is a collection of Orwell's correspondence with his Foreign Office handlers (1949) in the British National Archives. In one of these letters, he cautions the British against being too peaceful in their psy-ops, because the Burmese are inclined to respect violence. What may cause disgust and dissension in the U.K. will look like strong leadership in that corner of South East Asia.

I don't think that colonialism is what corrupts people. Trading one's own culture and values in exchange for another people's obedience is corrupting. Orwell was so spun on his version of socialism, and its dogma about the universal nature of people, that he couldn't see this fundamental truth. What he calls "looking like a fool" is ruling a particular people in the way that they expect and in the only way that works in practice. To do anything else would look like weakness to the Burmese crowd. Orwell knew this instinctively, but not intellectually. Deep down, he is a British Christian battling against Nature.

Kings are never free, and if Orwell doesn't want to shoot elephants or whip prisoners, he should get the **** out of Burma. There are plenty of Burmese willing to do the job. In fairness to George, I think he started to understand this as he got older, alone on his island…

LEAVE A COMMENT

NAMAZU E

I found pinktentacle.com yesterday when I was searching for an appropriate monster picture. They have an amazing post on namazu, catfish-creatures which cause earthquakes.

Namazu have joined my favorite monsters list. I'm going to reproduce a few choice pieces here. Go to their website for the entire, fascinating, article.

> *In November 1855, the Great Ansei Earthquake struck the city of Edo (now Tokyo), claiming 7,000 lives and inflicting widespread damage. Within days, a new type of color woodblock print known as* namazu-e *(lit. "catfish pictures") became popular among the residents of the shaken city. These prints featured depictions of mythical giant catfish (*namazu*) who, according to popular legend, caused earthquakes by thrashing about in their underground lairs. In addition to providing humor and social commentary, many prints claimed to offer protection from future earthquakes.*

Magical method of earthquake protection.

This protective print, which claims to prevent earthquake damage to one's home if attached to the ceiling, shows a group of remorseful catfish apologizing to the god Kashima for causing earthquakes while he was away.

Tug-of-war between namazu and the god Kashima.

This print shows a namazu *engaged in a fierce game of "neck tug-of-war" with the god Kashima. A group of earthquake victims root for Kashima, while those who typically profit from earthquakes (construction workers, firemen, news publishers, etc.) root for the catfish.*

Axis of Evil.

This print is a reference to the old Japanese saying, "The most frightening things are earthquakes, thunder, fires, and fathers." Here, a namazu *plays* janken *(rock-paper-scissors) with the gods of thunder and fire while an elderly man (father) looks on.*

I like fairytale creatures that are personifications of natural events; they are both good and bad, depending on how you look at them. Baba Yaga falls into this category, as well as Mother Holle (Hulda) and The Wild Hunt. Note that even while namazu were feared, they were still made fun of.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THERES A HAIR IN MY SOUP

She's your friend. Honest.

I like children's stories. I especially like the dark ones with monsters, evil step-sisters, witches and the supernatural. I've liked scary stories since I was a toddler, and I'm going to read scary stories to my children. I don't think that frightening monsters are bad, I think that they help kids face fears in a positive, healthy way.

Monsters have their place and it isn't everywhere. They are a metaphor for dangerous, unknown, poisonous things. Keats said something to the effect of: Only use a Greek god in your poetry when the situation described is worthy of a god. Apollo doesn't go grocery shopping and Zeus doesn't do laundry. Well, in my opinion, monsters have a time and place, and if they're summoned up where they don't belong, they send mixed messages.

> Mashing up children's books with monsters*: Whatever you think of Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, letting monsters loose on classic children's books has got to be a good idea*

Clearly, the author is not confident in her own judgement and is happy to let 'the market' do her thinking for her. Why would you use vampires to preach against 'fear of the unknown'? Vampires *raison d'etre* is to hurt people. To know them is to fear them. What's the message behind Dick and Jane befriending Dracula? Embrace things that are harmful to you?

There's a time and place for sex too. We all know the famous arguments surrounding *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Well, heads up:

> Jane Austen Novels to Get Erotic Makeover Because All Books Must Be Sexy Now

These stupid new books, and I don't use 'stupid' lightly, are worse than sensationalist money-making schemes. They are bad storytelling. They're the bad books Orwell warned against in my last post. They deliver a mixed message that some unfortunate kid, or some air-headed nitwit, will have to unlearn before they can blossom into a thinking adult.

LEAVE A COMMENT

WHAT WOULD HE SAY ABOUT HARRY POTTER? UPDATE

Harry Potter and Central Casting will teach you what to think.

George Orwell spent time perusing the magazine shelves at his local tobacconist. He liked to keep an eye on what the little people read and who published what the little people read.

Orwell didn't like what he found. From his essay, *Boys' Weeklies*:

> *Personally, I believe that most people are influenced far more than they would care to admit by novels, serial stories, films and so forth, and that from this point of view the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in life.*

Orwell was interested in women's 'sex' mags and boys' serial magazines for this reason. His beef was not with their intellectual impoverishment, but with the 'conservative' values that they promoted. He thought that the same tricks should be used to promote a leftist agenda. Orwell was disgusted that only 'conservative' publishers like Lord Camrose were in

on the action.

So, according to Orwell, what were the tricks?

> *All fiction from the novels in the mushroom libraries downwards is censored in the interests of the ruling class.*
>
> *… the characters are so carefully graded as to give almost every type of reader a character he can identify himself with.*

Orwell points out these 'types': boy-assistant paired with explorer/detective; the normal, athletic, high-spirited boy; slightly rowdier version of normal boy; aristocratic version; quieter, more serious version; stolid, "bulldog" version; reckless daredevil; clever, studious boy ; eccentric boy who isn't good at games but has a special talent; scholarship boy; the fat kid, etc. The list goes on as you would expect it to.

Orwell was writing in the 1940s and he makes a distinction between the older boys' weeklies and the newest ones. The newest ones all had a "leader/principal" that everybody looked up to (think Harry Potter); whereas the older ones focused on a group of peers.

There's also a difference between American weeklies and British ones. You guessed it, porn and violence:

> *Notice how much more knowledgeable the American extracts sound. They are written for devotees of the prize-ring, the others are not. Also, it ought to be emphasized that on its level the moral code of the English boys' papers is a decent one. Crime and dishonesty are never held up to admiration, there is none of the cynicism and corruption of the American gangster story. The huge sale of the Yank Mags in England shows that there is a demand for that kind of thing, but very few English writers seem able to produce it. When hatred of Hitler became a major emotion in America, it was interesting to see how promptly "anti-Fascism" was adapted to pornographic purposes by the editors of the Yank Mags. One magazine which I have in front of me is given up to a long, complete story, "When Hell Came to America," in which the agents of a "blood-maddened European dictator" are trying to conquer the U.S.A. with death rays and invisible aeroplanes. There is the frankest appeal to sadism, scenes in which the Nazis tie bombs to women's backs and fling them off heights to watch them blown to pieces mid-air, others in which they tie naked girls together by their hair and prod them with knives to make them dance, etc. etc.*

You and I know that the British were not blameless in fostering this attitude, but its 'artistic' incarnation is interesting, isn't it? Somebody should do a study of the American pulp-publishing concerns.

Finally, the women's sex mags! Think of a 'modern' woman: *Cosmopolitan*, *Sex in the City*, *Pretty Little Liars*, '*Real Housewives*' of Anywhere. *Dance Moms*.

What do all these things have in common, right at their core?

> *Sex, so far from being taboo, is* the *subject.*
>
> *It is the same fantasy all the time: pretending to be richer than you are.*

And this fantasy world has a purpose: to crowd out thinking about important topics of the day. It's escapism.

> *Not only is a five-to-six-pound-a-week standard of life set up as the ideal, but it is tacitly assumed that that is how working-class people really* do *live. The major facts are simply not faced.*

Women are encouraged to live in a na-na world where important things aren't and everybody consumes more.

So, on the surface of it, not much seems to have changed. Or has it? Orwell's personal campaign to get 'common' English on the BBC has bore fruit. It's certainly safe to address racism, xenophobia, homophobia in the pulp-press. It's safe to explore socialism, as long as the 'good guys' are organizing it. It's less safe to ask why they hate our freedoms.

Somehow I still doubt Orwell would be happy.

Update

Things have changed, consider these two quotes:

> *The working classes only enter into Gem and Magnet [boys' weeklies] as comics or semi-villains (race-course touts, etc.).*
>
> *And, as usual, the heroic characters all have to talk B.B.C.; they may talk Scottish or Irish or American, but no one in a star part is ever permitted to drop an aitch.*

Now back to our time. How many villains can you think of who speak The Queen's English? Especially in American movies! Who are the bad guys in Harry Potter?

2 COMMENTS

BRITISH MUSEUM ON THE

MILDENHALL TREASURE

anolen:

A little gem from the halls of the British Museum.

Originally posted on British Museum blog:

Richard Hobbs, curator, British Museum

My first encounter with the Mildenhall treasure was back in 1977 when I was eight years old. I received a copy of the new Roald Dahl book, an author of whom, like many children of my generation, I was a huge fan. 'The Wonderful story of Henry Sugar and six more' was a collection of short stories (I still have it; perhaps it's worth something, as a first edition) which bear more relation with Dahl's rather macabre tales aimed at adults than the timeless classics for children such as 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' or 'James and the Giant Peach'. Henry Sugar is a story about a man who discovers the ability to see through playing cards, and uses his gift to win vast sums of money in casinos. After the buzz of winning wears off, he starts to use his newly found wealth for…

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